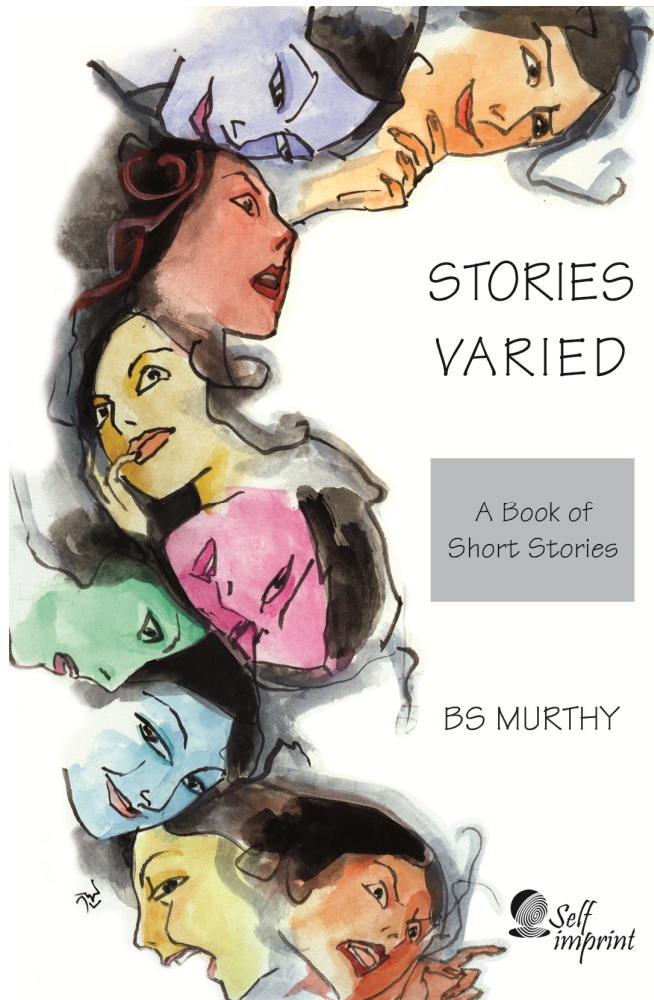




Stories Varied

A book of short stories

BS Murthy

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F-9, Nandini Mansion,
1-10-234, Ashok Nagar,
Hyderabad – 500 020

Dedicated to readers,

past, present 'n future,
of my body of work,
in full or in part(s)

Other books by BS Murthy

Benign Flame – Saga of Love

Jewel-less Crown - Saga of Life

Crossing the Mirage – Passing through youth

Glaring Shadow – A stream of consciousness novel

Prey on the Prowl - A Crime Novel

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Puppets of Faith: Theory of Communal Strife

Bhagvad-Gita: Treatise of self – help (A translation in verse)

Sundara Kānda - Hanuman's Odyssey (A translation in verse)

Foreword

With the addition of 'Prey on the Prowl' to my body of work, I thought the accretion was over without short story genre. Not that I didn't try my hand at that, indeed I did, but finding the output wanting, I didn't refill my pen again.

Maybe, literature was keen to have my contribution in this fictional sphere as well, so it seems, as beginning from July 2015, Vinita Dawra Nagia came up with "Write India Campaign of Times of India". Her idea was to let the aspiring writers build their stories on the 'prompts' provided by eleven of India's popular authors starting with Amish Tripathi.

When I penned Ilaa's Ire on Amish's prompt, it felt like I had crossed the unassailable frontier, and thereafter, for the next ten months, thanks to the prompts by Chetan Bhagat, Aswin Sanghi, Ravi Subramanian, Preeti Shenoy, Tuhin A. Sinha, Ravinder Singh, Durjoy Datta, Madhuri Banarjee, Jaisree Misra and Anita Nair, I had experienced the joy of short story writing.

That in the end, I could pen my Twelfth Tale, sans any prompting, perhaps, is a testimony to the success of Vinita's Write India Campaign.

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[Story 1](#)

Ilaa's Ire

Close to the city of Paithan, in a small village called Sauviragram, which lay along the banks of the great river Godavari, lived a woman named Ilaa. Being cotton farmers, her family was well to do, but not among the richest in the area. It was the harvest season, and cotton had to be picked from plants. The wholesalers and traders from Paithan would be arriving in just a few weeks, carrying gold and goods for barter. They would exchange what they carried for the cotton that the farmers grew. The bales of cotton had to be ready in time! Work was at its peak!

But Ilaa was not to be found in the fields. She wasn't working. Instead, she was sitting by the banks of the great river Godavari.

'I am sick of this!' she grunted loudly, dangling her weary legs in the languid waters. [*]

'Why not,' she thought, 'am I not a victim of the unmaking of the mores of yore that brought woman's life to this pass?

Gazing at the Sun, setting by then, she felt it symbolized the loss of sheen, of woman's high noon of life, pictured by her grandmother in bedtime tales.

'If only things remained the same,' she began to speculate about her would-have-been life, 'I would have gone to a gurukula to become a satyavadini at fifteen, and who knows, I might have blossomed into a Maitreyi of the day, if not a modern day Ghosa. Moreover, I would have been entitled to choose a man I fancied in a swayamvara, oh, what an appetizing prospect it is. Won't that prove our ancestors were wise enough to realize that woman's liberation lay in her right over her body to entrust it to the man she coveted? But how ignoramus the progeny of the wise have become to ordain woman to remain illiterate and live in ignorance! How she's given away in marriage, to a man of her father's choosing, lo, when she hasn't even matured! What else is woman nowadays if not man's vassal? How sad that women of Sauviragram, or Paithan for that matter, can't dare dream about things, which their ancestors took for granted. Maybe, same is the case with fair sex everywhere in the once fair land named after my namesake.'

As though to bring to the fore her dreams gone sour, the flow under her feet picked up stream.

Ilaa was born into a family of marginal farmers in Paithan. While mother earth, all along, had seemingly conjured up with the rain gods to make it bountiful in their paddy fields, as though not to deplete their meager landholding, mother nature too had ensured, over the generations, that their home had a single issue, male at that.

But much before she was born, as her grandfather died prematurely, though being hale and healthy, her father, bitten by the quick-buck bug, threw caution to the winds and wagered on the cash crops. That was in spite of the protestations of his mother and pleadings by his wife. As though to prove the old adage right that greed brings in grief, coinciding with his decision to harvest cotton, the kapas market went into depression. While prudence suggested course correction, as his gambling instinct got the better of him, raising the stakes at the next outing, he took the neighbours' land on lease for making a killing. What with the pests of Paithan too turning greedy, the failure of two successive crops, besides reducing him into a farmhand in his own land, made his mother a maid in a Brahman household. Though his wife wanted to follow suit, as his mother was averse to it, she was left at home to fend for herself the meagerness of their means.

It was in those hard times that Ilaa was born to the unenthusiastic welcome of all; though soon enough, enamoured of her charming demeanour, everyone began to hold her dear, her father included. But as gods are prone to forgive their favourites, sooner or later that is, Ilaa had a brother for company when she crossed five. While the fraternal frolics pleased her heart, it was her grandma's tales, picked up from the Brahman woman she served, which stirred her mind, only to depress her soul eventually! The thought that if only her grandmother had had her fair share of her ancestral property, as per the Vedic norms, she would not have been constrained to toil as a maid, left Ilaa with a sickening feeling about the injustice of it all. In her grandmother's unjust deprivation of property and in the undue denial of her own education, she began to see how women's legitimate interests have come to be jeopardized by man's spin to the ancient mores.

As Ilaa, at eight, was still smarting from the denial of schooling, her marriage to eleven-year old Ilaiah ensured that she was deprived even of her childhood liberties. As her fate would have it, Ilaiah's father, the owner of a ten-acre farm in Sauviragram, in search of a bride for his heir, happened to hear about her allure, clouded though by the gloom of poverty. But, sensing that a beautiful bahu could accrue a like progeny to the clan, he chose to pursue the match regardless. While her father thought it was a godsend, having espied Ilaiah, and finding him ungainly, Ilaa felt that but for the matching names, it was no match at all. Nevertheless, led by her mother and grandmother on the course of female compromises, Ilaa ascended the altar of a child marriage though to remain with her parents until she matured at ten.

'What would have been my life like had I obeyed my instinct and refused to budge.' she tried to envision her life in a fresh light but as the clouds of despair, cast on her psyche, rendered that impossible, she gave up with a sigh. 'If life were to fail fantasy, how is it better than death?'

But then, at an auspicious moment that noon, Ilaa was led out of Paithan to reach Sauviragram well before dusk, and as if to portend the life in the offing for her, the delayed carriage forced her to set foot in her sasural at Sun set. As though the diminishment of her new domicile, ensured by patriarchal expediency, was not tough enough for her to cope up with, nature, in the meantime, turned the Ilaiahs into an odd couple by endowing her to outgrow her husband by a couple of inches. But it was the subjugation of women in Sauviragram, far worse than that in Paithan that she could attribute to the rural urban divide, but was unable to reconcile, which disturbed her the most. It was thus, when she gained in age, and on the ground, she began 'educating' the village girls about the imperatives of equal rights for women, which

triggered an exodus of complaints to her doorsteps that her father-in-law, a less conforming conservative as Ilaa saw, had to contend with.

Though Ilaa restrained herself on the social front from then on, lest she should occasion a schism in Sauviragram, in the domestic domain she was constrained to bear the burden of barrenness, notwithstanding thirteen years of cohabitation with her man. While the rest pestered her on that count, her father-in-law, though disappointed at the delay, was optimistic about an eventual fruition. Once when Ilaiah, as if in half jest, broached the topic of a co-wife for her, for him to procreate, she retorted by asking him to restore the ancient norm of niyoga for her, wherein a woman was allowed to spend time with her man's brother or a relative for off-spring. And that put an end to the topic but not to his thirst for a fresh nuptial.

As if to break the uneasy impasse, when her father-in-law died of snake bite, Ilaa turned the Vedic heat on Ilaiah's farmland by advocating her sister-in-law's case for a share in it. And that ensured her conjugal relations with him had further soured. But aided by custom, even as Ilaiah retained the reins on the land, to the fair sex of Paithan and yonder, Ilaa's self-less opposition to it made her the reigning queen of Sauviragram. While that completed the couple's circle of discord, what with his becoming his own man after his father's death, Ilaiah felt bold to steer his life on a bigamous course. As he found the bride, the purohit fixed the muhurat that was after the harvesting.

'It's not that I have to share his bed with another that hurts.' Ilaa thought in bitterness. 'As woman's charms are prone to wane sooner than later, don't I know it's stupid to imagine that I could hold him till the very end. But isn't it galling that branding me barren, he should sleep with another. What if he is incapable of impregnating woman? Who knows; so why shouldn't niyoga be the first option for fruition? Oh, how man had managed to usurp woman's rights to upset her life? Is it left for her to wail her ill-fate until the doom's day? No way. Didn't father-in-law say that reformation is a harbinger of change but revolution is the upheaval of old order? Yes I have to shake Sauviragram to wake it up to the old order so that it awakens Paithan, and through it the rest of Ilavarta. But how am I to achieve that?'

Ilaa racked her brains till they frayed at their ends.

'Why not I set the crops afire and perish in the fields?' she thought in the end. 'That would singe dharti maata for sure but won't she bear the ordeal for the sake of her hapless daughters.'

Springing up from the sands, Ilaa headed towards the fields with a spring in her step.

Amish Tripathi's prompt [*]

Story 2

'201' Qualms

She sat in the Starbucks café, sipping her coffee and staring out of the window. The blood stained knife lay next to her handbag, covered with her blue silk scarf. [*]

Being the lone customer at the half-open café, as she was trying to grapple with the unforeseen development, the creaking sound at the entrance unhinged her train of thought. As she espied a handsome youth ogling her, fervently hoping that he wouldn't settle himself at the adjacent table, she instinctively covered the damning

thing with the pallu of her chiffon sari. When a bearer, as though on cue, led him to the other end of the floor, she heaved a sigh of relief.

'Oh, how I've got into this mess?' she thought nervously. 'Where would all this lead me to? Was it fair on her part to involve me in a hazardous activity? Why didn't I drop the damned thing the moment she thrust it upon me, without a warning at that! What did I do instead? I did cover it up along with her hand gloves with my own scarf! What prompted me to connive with her to conceal the murder weapon? Was it her righteous cause or was it our lesbian love? Maybe both, and if not, instead of boarding the train to Lonavala, she would have been behind bars by now. How I allowed myself to be saddled with this incriminating thing that I might be caught along with! Besides, what if the law were to catch up with her, in spite of her ingenuous planning and meticulous execution? Won't that land me in trouble as well? Better I check up the Indian Penal Code.'

She reached for her iPhone and browsed for the relevant section of the code that read: "201. Causing disappearance of evidence of offence, or giving false information to screen offender.—Whoever, knowing or having reason to believe that an offence has been committed, causes any evidence of the commission of that offence to disappear, with the intention of screening the offender from legal punishment, or with that intention gives any information respecting the offence which he knows or believes to be false; if a capital offence.—shall, if the offence which he knows or believes to have been committed is punishable with death, be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to seven years, and shall also be liable to fine; if punishable with imprisonment for life.....". Going no farther, she muttered in despair, 'Oh! Goddamn Sudha'.

She hailed the bearer to order another round of coffee, and began recapitulating their fateful association.

'She first met Sudha aboard Sahyadri Express at Lonavala that she herself boarded at Pune. As they exchanged notes, it transpired that they both were on their way to Mumbai; even as she was keen on entering into the arena advertising, Sudha was bent upon exploring the avenues for social activism. By the time they alighted at the Chatrapathi Shivaji Terminus, they were so drawn to each other that they set out to set up together. Soon, she joined a male-dominated advertising agency and Sudha began lending her 'service' hand and 'ideological' head to Trishna, the lady-head of a non-government organization engaged in advocating clean energy. Though she herself was pragmatist to a tee and Sudha was an idealist to the core, their sincere natures wedded them to an unbound friendship.'

As the bearer brought her coffee, savouring the beverage, unmindful of the surroundings, she was immersed in her recap.

'When Sudha was holidaying in Kashmir, struck by Cupid, she fell for one Captain Rawat, a commander of sorts, stationed in the valley to curb the militancy on the raise. Even as her sense of service jelled with Rawat's patriotic fervour, her parents, owing to the risks involved in his calling, were averse to having an army officer for a son-in-law. When Sudha prevailed upon her parents, with no mean help from her, the spirited beau led his euphoric bride to the altar to tie the knot. After a month-long honeymoon down south, Sudha rejoined her in their modest apartment to resume her mundane work at Trishna's outfit. Nevertheless, thanks to the intermittent unions with her man, which followed prolonged separations, Sudha remained in the seventh heaven. When she was all set to join Rawat in Jammu's barracks, tragedy struck in the

form of a fidayeen attack in which he was martyred, albeit after slaying five of the six intruders, all by himself.'

She recalled the somber ceremony at Rashtrapathi Bhavan, when the President, to posthumously honour Rawat for his exemplary valour, presented an Ashoka Chakra to Sudha. While Sudha adopted that as her new mangalsutra, vowing never to yield space to another in its place, thanks to their lesbianism, occasioned by the combination of circumstances, she too came to value it. Soon, wiping her moist eyes and controlling her emotions, she continued with the recapitulation.

'The thought that Rawat had sacrificed his flowery life for his motherland made the nation dearer to Sudha, nourishing which became the mission of her life. So she lent her heart and soul to Trishna's agenda, which made her the latter's trusted lieutenant. What's more, to the delight of the left-leaning and to the chagrin of the right-tilting, the elegant and articulate Sudha, who came to dominate the electronic media's stilted debates, became, as was said, a thorn in the flesh of the big-buck vultures. While Sudha gloated in the glare of the ensuing publicity, Trishna enlarged her overseas reach to rake in more Euros to expand her operations deep into the hinterland.'

By then, as most of the tables were occupied, thinking its better she moved out, she signaled the bearer to fetch the bill. As she reached for her handbag, to pull out the wallet, she was shocked to realize that she had been carrying the damned knife as an additional baggage. Having hurriedly stuffed the scarf and all into her handbag, as she waited for the bill, she looked around to see if she was attracting attention. Sensing that the guy had his eyes still fixed on her, she got a little scary; what if, by chance, he had seen us at the CST, and would resort to blackmailing me? Cursing Sudha all again, she wondered how to sneak out of the café without being stalked by him. As luck would have it, soon he made it to the loo, and thanking nature's call that came to her rescue, she rushed out to hire a cab to continue her journey in the tracks of the time passed by.

'As though to prove that 'good things don't last forever', destiny brought Sudha face to face with the ugly face of Trishna's hidden agenda. When she stumbled upon Trishna's secret closet, skeletons in their scores tumbled out to her shock. Sensing that under the guise of environmentalism, Trishna was at undermining the country's economic well-being, she couldn't help but juxtapose Rawat's supreme sacrifice to uphold that. First she thought of turning into a whistleblower but aware of the long list of 'who is who' among Trishna's backers, on second thought, she saw the futility of it all. Besides, she reckoned that Trishna would ensure that she is bumped off without a whimper to put a lid on it. As Sudha revealed no more, she herself thought of it no more.'

Stepping out of the cab en route, to ease her nerves, she shopped for a fag, which she puffed away in Sudha's trail.

'Obsessed with the idea of seeing Trishna's end, without anyone getting wise to it, she began plotting a perfect murder, the fad of many a murderer, made more difficult by cell-phone towers and CCTV cameras. However, equal to the challenge, she planned to the tee and killed Trishna with an antique knife with which Rawat, after exhausting his ammunition, slew the fifth fidayeen, for she felt that would be symbolic of his act. Though it was prudent to destroy the murder weapon, she wanted to hold onto it as long as she lived; but what if, by any outside chance, the police were to question her and search her premises as well? So, wanting her to whisk it away to safety, using someone's cell-phone, she made that call asking her to make it to the CST with a spare handbag.'

How shocked she was hearing the chilling account of the killing and how scary it felt holding that blood-stained knife, held in those hand gloves, which, somehow, she managed to wrap in the scarf that she wore then.

'Coinciding with her parents' planned pilgrimage to Badrinath, Sudha wanted to pay her homage to Rawat's soul with Trishna's blood. Having obtained a week's leave of absence to rest and recreate at Lonavala, two days back, she contrived to ensure one of her colleagues had seen her off at the CST. But for this cell-age that should have been a good enough alibi, and so, reaching Lonavala in three hours, she dropped her smart-phone at a street corner, and alerted Airtel to make it inoperative.

At the dead of night, last night, she sneaked out of her home with a pair of hand gloves and that knife, tucked under her reversible burka. Alighting at the CST before dawn, she walked her way to 'Trishna's Abode'; she avoided hiring a cab so as not to leave any trail for the police to track her down. Upon reaching the destination, she pressed the buzzer with glows on, and as the intended victim opened the door wide-eyed, she lost no time in slaying her with that knife. As Trishna lay dead, she left the place without raising an alarm, and wearing the burka by its reverse side on the way, she walked back to the CST, and having called her, waited there to entrust the incriminating stuff to her.'

Oh, how serene Sudha looked when they met and how animated she was in recounting the incident!

'Handling the handbag that she gave her, Sudha said that after alighting the train at Lonavala, she could take a detour to exit the station before which she would transfer the burka into it for its suitable disposal thereafter, and that should bring the perfect murder to its legal closure.'

'It could as well have been,' she thought, and after reflecting for a while, she picked up her iPhone, to compose a message to Sudha for record, as anyway, her smart-phone was inoperative still.

'Won't my action amount to betrayal of trust?' she thought pausing to press the 'send' button. 'Could be, but law doesn't have riders to it when it comes to complying with it. But had Sudha kept it all to herself, maybe for all that, she could have got away with it? Well, that is life in spite of law, and law regardless of love. But is it not ironical that she had accentuated mine own sense of duteousness, which would eventually undo her and me too thereby.'

Sending the message, 'We both lose as law overwhelmed my love - Ramya', she headed for Fort House Police Station.

Chetan Bhagat's prompt [*]

Story 3

"?"

I observed him carefully as he walked to the door. I knew that time was running out but suppressed the urge to check my watch. I took a deep breath and started counting in reverse under my breath. "Ten, nine, eight, seven..." [*]

When he slammed the door, wasn't it like I came out of trance, stuck at 'four'? I might've paused, lost to his mesmeric gait; how else he could've slipped out in three secs. Don't I love his gait more than his manner, captivating though it is; he knows that

as well, and yet he walked out on me. Isn't it like deserting a companion amidst a desert? Worse it is, ditching the mate in the heat of the act?

How I rushed out craving to catch a glimpse of him, maybe for the last time, and how distressed I was at not finding him? Maybe, his eagerness to exit from my life outstripped my urge to espy his gait. Standing at the gate, didn't I feel like I was stranded in life? Oh, how things had come to this pass with him? Slowly, how the irony of my situation began to dawn upon me? That's even in my state of dejection! Didn't I feel amused that the effect of my fascination should've become the cause of my disappointment? If only I was not lost to myself admiring his gait, wouldn't I have prevailed upon him not to desert me? Could I have? Maybe, but it was philosophy that had offered its hand to me. If not, how I would've been able to drag myself into the emptiness of my home for introspection. That I was drained out to sink into the sofa was another matter.

Whoever thought that our love match could become a mismatch? Is it really so? Am I not embracing hypocrisy to camouflage my idiocies? What am I to gain by a false sense of sympathy? It's time I learnt a few lessons in psychology as well. Won't that help me in understanding the realities of life? No denying but where am I to begin with? Am I to first climb the heady highs of romance or descend the marital slopes of discord? What if I swallow the sour before savoring the sweet? That's fine if the show is on; now that its curtains down, better I alter the menu. Better still, why not I am a little ingenious to alternate; won't that help me keep the focus even.

As Shruti was wont to sing paeans about Rahul, how I used to mock her that by showering praises on her cousin, she was bound to bankrupt her beau! Jokes apart, while his persona in her album enamored my heart, hadn't her ballads on him become music to my ears? What about her dramatic announced of his impending migration to the U.S., didn't I sense my heart skipping a beat as if to begin my life afresh? Unable to hold the burden of excitement, couldn't it have spilled some of it onto my face for her to grasp. Was it not her turn to tease me by saying sorry for making me lose my heart to an exaggeration? What a heady feeling before an impending rendezvous.

When he waved his arrival to her O'Hare, didn't he love-gait straight into my heart! As if guided by my enamored eyes, as he advanced towards me like a robot, was it not like a dream coming true? Oh, how I was impelled to grab his hand with both hands even as he was tentative in extending it to me! Was it not love at first sight? Did he lose any time to propose dating? Did I miss a date ever? Is there anything to better that in all fiction? They are not my words but of Shruti's! Wonder how nascent love can make life so exciting! Won't it in return seek copulation for its own fulfillment? Alas, why on its path of fruition, love has to contend with cultural hindrances? Won't our culture hamper lovers' route to the altar with caste hurdles besides status barriers. But then, living in the West, we could go west, and that's what we did, didn't we?

How adamant were our parents to tie us in a nuptial knot. Didn't his mom say she would rather starve but not break bread with low caste lass? How did my dad dismiss my choice of a high-caste lowness; didn't I tell him not to be mean being rich. But how naïve was Rahul about his mom's turnaround? That's in spite of my telling him that the waiting game suited her and not us. Didn't we waste one youthful year for nothing! Wasn't that enough for us to go west, but how ill at ease he was when I moved into his flat. Wasn't he shocked as I broke the news back home? Well, it worked with my dad but Rahul's mom was made of a sterner stuff, and that called for one-upmanship, didn't it? What was my threat to display-ad our live-in in the Indian

press but just that? Yet credit the scandal in the offing for turning that bully into a billie. Was it really so, as she had the last laugh, won't it seem in hindsight that it's a tactical retreat on her part.

What a wedding it was though? A designer wedding it was, all said so, didn't they? Wouldn't have dad splashed half his black money on it, but did I suffer from any qualms about it then? Having been a beneficiary all along, what's the point in my becoming a moralist now? Maybe, the wounds of life open our minds to its profligacy; could be, but does a grand wedding guarantee a lasting marriage? No way, as it appears. Of what avail was that fanfare of a marriage for Rahul's mom could readily fray at its rough edges? Why blame her when my own attitude, or lack of it, was the cause of my undoing? Oh, how I took Rahul for granted? Well, I was even callous to his needs? Wasn't that enough to let her take the wind out of our marital sails?

How she began scripting the plot of my downfall even before we settled down in Seattle. What for her unending tele-talks with him, feigning depression, that too at our bedtime. Wouldn't have that whore known that sex is ninety-percent mental? How the devil planned to fail our sex-life as a prelude to wrecking our marriage! Weren't her life-long sacrifices for him and his disregard for her undivided attention the recurring themes of her emotional blackmail? What cunning to pepper her talks with how she loved me being his beloved? Oh, how all that infused a guilt feeling in him leading to a sense of alienation from me?

What about dad, didn't he willy-nilly strain our tenuous union; how he used to pester Rahul to invest in India's booming real estate? Wasn't his offer to advance monies meant to preempt any excuses? How Rahul could've refused that without raising my hackles? What an irony that the acceptance entailed a price to be paid! Won't decency demand that I should own what was bought, at least till he repaid the loan. What else he could've done than to let dad have his way? Why did dad go on an acquisition spree that tended to squeeze our resources? Was he eager to uplift his son-in-law's status in his own circles or did he intend to secure my financial future post-divorce, or worse, was it him aim to preempt Rahul from providing to his parents? Isn't it stupid in every way, well, but he did dig the grave for that bitch to bury our marriage, so it seems.

If only Rahul hadn't asked the devil to come and sup with us in the U.S. Being a mom-boy how could he have negated her request to rest and recreate in his shade? Though my sixth sense warned me of the impending trouble, could I have put my foot down without looking cussed? How fatal it proved to be as the whore poisoned his mind and undermined my love! How she took him under her spell to sound the death knell for our marriage! Oh, the way she weaned him away from me, lo, did the bitch master black magic to become a witch as well! Why didn't Shruti tell me about his mom-sickness, shouldn't she have, being frank and forthright althrough? Maybe, it was my fate that faltered her at full disclosure, where it really mattered.

Am I not into a blaming game? How does it help me in anyway? Why not I better self-introspect? It's as if I perched my life on a hollow branch, didn't I? Weren't my spending sprees getting on his strain nerves? How can I put it on papa for letting me become a spendthrift? Shouldn't I have adapted myself to my new situation, and even behaved better. But what about dad's indents for settling the outstanding, wonder how Rahul didn't call it quits much before! Why did I limit my alacrity only to the bedroom? When it came to the kitchen, wasn't I plain lazy? How does it help blaming mom for pampering me? Didn't I know Rahul loves all those spicy Andhra recipes? Yet I left him to fend for himself with his self-prepared stuff or McDonald's hamburgers!

Didn't I know he cooks for nuts? Was it any justification that I wasn't particular about the food I eat? What else it was but sheer callousness? That too, when he was so caring to cater to all my needs, why not I admit my fancies? Why did I let my lethargy become the Achilles heel of our marriage for that witch to push through 'doubts of duty' into Rahul's mind? How she took over the kitchen as a prelude to leading him out of my home, and life as well!

Would it have been any different had we been living in India? Without any dollars to exchange, how could have dad pestered Rahul to invest? Given the taboo, where was the question of my man getting into the kitchen for it would have shamed us both? Wouldn't I have taken to the Indian ways of a working wife? Probably, besides, isn't the air over there more conducive for couples to cling on to each other regardless, though I hear it's steadily getting worse on that count? Whatever, with our flanks covered somehow, wouldn't have that devil stayed put in her place? Surely she would have, and it could've been a different story to write home about; well, it's neither here or there.

Why suddenly this nauseating feeling? Why couldn't it be morning sickness? When did I last have my periods? Whatever was the turmoil, how could I've missed the count? Oh, how he loves children; surely more than any man I've ever known. How thrilled he would have been at the prospect of my carrying. With the sprouting of his seed right within me, wouldn't have his love for me had had a rebirth? How eager was he initially to tend me when I'm in the family way. Haven't I overheard the bitch branding me barren to her son that was as she gave me enough hints that she was glad I didn't bear to pollute her high clan with my low blood? Wouldn't she have played upon his craving for an offspring to nudge him into a fresh nuptial? Surely she would have for that could be her game plan.

Now that so much psychic muck had flowed under our marital bridge, could his child in me make him change his mind? But then, who knows what fate has in the offing, and a trial too costs nothing. Why not I ring him up, no, I'll personally tell him so that I could sink into his arms.

Sprung from the sofa, I dashed to the door, counting aloud, "One, two, three, four."

Aswin Sanghi's prompt [*]

Story 4

Cupid's Clue

What the hell is going on between my husband and that bitch?' Maya's patience was at its lowest ebb and she was ready to burst.

Sanjay knew that she was serious.

'Look, Maya. There is nothing going on between the two of them. Just a little bit of healthy flirting, I'd say.'

"Flirting? Healthy flirting? Really Sanjay . . ." she rolled her eyes in disgust.

"That's what you men call it? There is nothing healthy about flirting, Sanjay, not for a married man. Healthy flirting is a term introduced by perverted men who want to lend legitimacy to their extramarital dalliances. Flirting invariably has a sexual connotation to it."

She got up from her seat and walked around the room gesticulating and muttering something to herself. Suddenly she stopped, turned back, looked at Sanjay and asked, "Did my husband sleep with her? You are his friend. Did he ever tell you anything about it?" [*]

"What if Chaya lets Suresh sleep with her and if she does not?" he said tentatively.

"Won't it make a fucking difference for me," she said unequivocally.

"Would it be possible for Suresh to sleep with her unless she grants him the final favour?"

"What makes you think that the bitch won't let him screw her?"

"Why not recall what Sathyam told his seducer friend Prasad in Benign Flame that you only gave me to read, sorry I haven't returned it as I want to read it all again, 'money and looks are okay to an extent to lure women, but better realize it's the luck that enables one to lay them. Why, you can't screw even a whore if you're not destined to have her, your visit to the brothel would have coincided with her periods, and the next time you're eager, she could have shifted out of the town itself'."

"Could be, but you know that bitch was ever after him."

"I also know Suresh always preferred you over her."

"Gone are those days my dear, these days he is over the seven-year itch and that bitch could be taking advantage of that. In spite of your friendly blinkers, you couldn't have failed to see their wayward ways."

"Look Maya, I was only trying to play it down to cool things for you."

"Thanks for not wanting to fish in the troubled waters of an old flame."

"That makes me recall Chaya's words at your wedding."

"I know that bitch has a gift of gab, what did she say?"

"Bereft of money love is but a hackneyed expression."

"Maybe Cupid is a lesser god than Mammon."

"Yet they collude to consign some to the doghouse of life."

"As Astraea the goddess of innocence connives," she said nostalgically.

"What else can the star-crossed lovers do than blame the conspiring deities?"

"Not holding it against the jilter is gentlemanly isn't it?" she said taking his hand.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said pressing her hand.

"But what about that bitch?" she said withdrawing her hand.

"Maybe she is merrily leading Suresh up the garden path?"

"Don't you know how desperate she was to hook him then?"

"That was when he was an eligible bachelor."

"You think she could be flirting now to hurt him."

"Who knows if she at killing two birds with one stone?"

"What if I expose her to her man to give her a taste of her own medicine?"

"That's a suicidal prescription."

"Why do you think so?"

"What if her man deserts her?"

"She gets her just deserts, won't she?"

"Were he to murder her or get her killed?"

"Won't that leave the world one bitch less, why won't it?"

"But life's mistakes come with collateral damages, won't they?"

"And what's life without risks?"

"What's this hatred in the bosom of a loving character?" he said taking her hand.

"Maybe I'm burning with jealousy."

"Born out of mere suspicion, isn't it?"

"How distressing it is to imagine their togetherness," she said squeezing his hand.

"Ouch," he yelled retrieving his hand.

"Sorry, my distress acquired a physical force," she said breathing out into his palm.

"Depression I can understand but not this desperation," he said fondling her shoulder.

"Only a woman in my situation can grasp that."

"Could be," he said withdrawing his hand.

"Did he lead me to the altar to bring me to the crossroads of life?" she said taking his hand.

"So be it, take a look at the signboards of redressal on the other three roads."

"Maybe that's the way to approach life," she said resignedly.

"Don't be pulled down," he said pressing her hand.

"Won't you help me in taking my pick?" she said looking into his eyes.

"If only you pull your socks up."

"How can I as my soul is seized at its core by sexual jealousy?" she said in tears.

"Get freed and it would lead to orgasmic nirvana," he said wiping her tears.

"Am I to languish as sanyasin as they indulge in lust? No way," she said determinedly.

"I only want you not to jump the signal and upset the applecart that's all."

"Who's applecart, theirs or mine?"

"Do you take me for a double agent or what?"

"Sorry for spoiling," she said sounding apologetic.

"If it's your marital right to retain Suresh isn't it her womanly right to covet him?"

"Well, her man too has a right over her fidelity, doesn't he have?"

"Of course, but that's not the issue, is it?"

"Why not, as I have a right to alert him about her infidelity."

"That would boomerang on your marriage, and rightly so?"

"Why do you sound so scary?"

"Am I not concerned about you?"

"Don't I know that more than ever?"

"So better give up that idea."

"It would be no more than a subsiding storm."

"What if that derails her marriage?"

"Didn't she ask for it by trespassing into my marital space? Let her go to hell, how do I care."

"If her man starts harassing her, why won't Suresh offer her his shoulder to cry on?"

"Oh, that's bound to exacerbate my predicament, why didn't I think about it?"

"Worse, if her man were to divorce her, won't your man feel obliged to man her show?"

"Oh God, that would be like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire itself."

"That's all about the dilemmas of life."

"Take me to the signboards of other three routes at the crossroads."

"Before that know man always comes back to his wife in the end?"

"Well."

"So take the languid route to reclamation," he said sounding persuasive.

"You know that I'm not a laidback type."

"Being a firebrand take the proactive path then?"

"What is that?" she said taking his hand.

"Welcome her into a threesome sexual fold."

"What an idea sirji," she said withdrawing her hand.

"Deadly idea so to say; if she were a flirt, she would flee from the field, won't she?"

"What if she jumps into our bed?"

"Won't that take you to the frontiers of lesbianism for achieving orgasmic nirvana?"

"Are you serious?"

"If you haven't fantasized about it, ask your woman friends who could have."

"All said and done, how I could sleep with my enemy, make no mistake about it."

"Didn't Byron say that there is a pleasure in passing through the pathless woods, and that was in the context of incest, and it could hold good for threesome sex as well."

"By the way, what's the orgasmic nirvana you were hinting at?"

"It's the mental empathy of a couple as one of them indulges with a third character."

"As a theory it is okay, I suppose."

"If alive to your spouse's innate promiscuity, it's practicable as well."

“Maybe but it’s not for me.”

“Better I leave you to your own counsel,” he said getting up to leave.

“With either way leading me nowhere, how can you leave me stranded as is where?” she said holding him back.

“Am I forcing you to stay that way?” he said and moved towards the main door.

“Wait Sanjay,” she said aloud as he was about to open the door.

“What’s new?” he said turning around.

“Well Cupid has given me the clue,” she said pacing up to him.

“What is that?”

“Why not I become naughty and start an affair?”

“On the rebound, that is?”

“So be it,” she said holding his hand.

“So, the stupid Cupid wants you to set rebounds in motion.”

“Not so if it’s with a single man,” she said caressing his hand.

“What are you aiming at?”

“Wonder why it never occurred to me to ask you why you didn’t marry any?”

“Neither did I complain about it, did I?”

“You are my good boy, aren’t you?” she said hugging him.

“Be a good girl and control yourself,” he said enlacing her nevertheless.

“Did you ever fantasize it with me?” she crooned into his ears.

“Look Maya...” he began, and as if not wanting to hear anything to the contrary, tightening their embrace, she sealed his lips with hers.

Ravi Subramanian’s prompt [*]

Story 5

Autumn Love

She willed herself to not to check her phone to see if he had replied. It had been about three days now. She hated that she was constantly checking his ‘last seen at’ status and yes, he had logged in just five minutes ago. Yet she couldn’t stop herself. This sinking feeling to find absolutely no communication from him was becoming unbearable, almost tortuous.

And then, just as she sat down in her chair, her phone vibrated. With her heart thudding in her ear, she unlocked her phone and stared at the screen. Finally! It was his message.

But when she opened it and read it, she nearly stopped breathing. She didn’t know if he was joking or not. What was this? [*]

‘Is it a point of no return?’ she thought involuntarily moving to the edge of the chair.

Reading his 'have you forgotten about the castration?' message, she sank into the chair thinking, 'is it a lighthearted joke or as a loaded message?', and for a clue, began to recall the events of the year passed by.

'Oh, how my life had turned on its head when I turned fifty?' she thought in wonderment. 'That's when I immunized my heart against attractions and insulated my life from vacillations! So I believed, didn't I? But when he enamored my heart to give a flirty spin to my life, didn't it dawn upon me that I had only sterilized it for a ritual regimen, and no more. Oh, how his first glance pierced my heart to stir my life that very instant!'

Returning from a temple when she found him alone in the drawing room, she felt as if god had sent his angel to receive her in her own abode. The moment their eyes met, it was as if they began their joint search for a love ground to share, which they had to abandon as her husband entered the scene from behind the curtain.

He was a friend of her husband's childhood pal settled in the States. Having spent the best part of his life there, he came back with his wife for good, leaving their two children, who were US citizens. That was six months back and they had since settled in Hyderabad, where, incidentally, both her married daughters stayed. As he happened to be in their town alone, to explore some business opportunities there, that evening, he came to call on her husband at their common-friend's behest. Introductions over, as her husband wanted her to prepare some coffee for them; she went into the kitchen with a heavy heart.

'While my missing his sight had understandably irked me, didn't the thought that he too would miss my sight inexplicably hurt me?' she began reminiscing about that dream encounter. 'But then, how the smell of the boiling decoction lifted my spirits for it portended serving him some steamy coffee with my own hands. When he said he never tasted anything better, how I hoped he would leave some dregs for my palate to share his satisfaction. What a disappointment it was seeing him empty the cup and how exhilarated I was when he said he had broken his life-long habit of leaving the dregs. Then, as he was preparing to leave, how depressed I was, but how relieved I was when my husband invited him to visit us again!'

She got up from the chair and as if to walk down the memory lane, she walked up to the compound gate.

'Oh, how that fateful evening changed the autumn tenor of my life!' she went on reminiscing. 'Were it the deities I pray that chose to pave a pathway of love for me? Or was it a case of my prayers gone awry? Before he stirred my heart, how sedate was my life, sterile though? After all, there was no material change after he had entered into it. Neither I did I venture onto his love ground nor did I let him into my sexual sphere. Why should life seem drab now as he cold shouldered me? Why not, won't the change of heart alter the tenor of life? Even the one as dull as mine, well, but it did start on an exciting note for a provincial girl like me.'

She was born to humble parents, who felt increasingly proud of her as she grew up. After all, she turned out to be the small town's beauty and the brains of its academics. When she was eighteen, calf love turned a new leaf in her life. The object of her adoration happened to be the stopgap lecturer from a nearby town. He taught maths alright but the equation was wrong for their marriage as he was doubly aged and twice married. Yet, amidst the protestations from her parents, with her tenacity of love, augmented by obduracy of adventure, she ascended the altar to be led by him to

his native town. Her marital life, underscored by her zest for it, though clouded by his thrift, was exemplified by her two cute daughters born in quick succession.

‘Didn’t his thrift drift towards miserliness soon pushing my life into nothingness.’ she began to recollect that phase of her life when her children were growing up. ‘Why, as his passion for lovemaking too lost traction, how my life entered into the arena of frustration? Yet I shut my mind to adulterous thoughts, didn’t I? But did he stop at that? Why, he did acquire a sense of insecurity as well and how insensibly I imbibed both his vices! Maybe that’s why I learnt short-hand as a long handle for my secretarial security. Was it really so? Wouldn’t have my own fear of the future bred an urge for self-preservation in my subconscious mind? Who knows, I might’ve been seeking to secure my own future independent of him, but at what cost really. I was undone then, not known to me then.’

As a way out of her drab life, she shifted her focus away from her husband to center it on her daughters. How she wanted to keep them all for herself! But, as they grew up, seeing them getting closer to their father, all the more she tried to retain her mental hold on them. When she realized at length that she had ceded much of her daughters’ emotional ground to her husband, as if to offset that loss on a spiritual plane, she infused religiousness into her consciousness. Besides, by then, as the age gap began the spouses began to take its toll on their connubiality, her newfound spirituality became a tool to soothe her suppressed sexuality. Thus in time, she got habituated to lead her life in a semi-spiritual mode that was before the daughters were married off.

‘How their marriages threw my life out of gear.’ she continued with the recollection of her life and times. ‘With much of his life-long savings turning into their dowries and what with his retirement too round the corner, didn’t he become a pathetic picture of insecurity? And when it was my turn to foot the bill, didn’t I become even more insecure about my own future? That’s in spite of my handsome savings and the remaining length of service life! Maybe, insecurity lies in one’s mind and not in the investment portfolios.’

So, reinvigorating herself on the religious ground, she began perambulating around the deities in assorted temples, praying them for reciprocity in acting as her security guards against life’s vicissitudes. Not content with insuring her life for material impediments, she added numerous goddesses to guard her against feminine turpitudes. Living thus in a man’s world, she managed to keep the womanizers at bay from her exceptional ‘past the prime’ charms.

‘How did the goddesses down their guard that day?’ she thought amusedly as she walked back into her house. ‘Didn’t they also leave me vulnerable to his charms when he came the very next day?’

That morning, when her husband went out to fetch some vegetables, he knocked at the door saying he wanted to peep into their place passing by it. Enjoying his expected lie, she involuntarily said that he could feel at home till her husband came. But when it occurred to her that he could’ve been lying in the wait to meet her alone, she felt like soothing his weary legs by exposing her shapely ones to his thirsty eyes. So, before her husband’s arrival, she conceived umpteen ways by which she slyly revealed many of her sari-clad charms to his feasting eyes. When he asked her cell-phone number to ‘soothe his ears’ as well, she gave it along with a safety manual.

Sometime after her husband’s return, when he left with a heavy heart, while feeling palpably excited, she felt vaguely miserable. That night as she relived those

enlivening moments, brought about by her uncharacteristic behaviour, she realized that she was in love with him. Though she was amused at that, yet she suffered from chasm of qualms over her conduct as a married woman. Shocked at the prospect of a liaison, she resolved to use all her moral strength not to let her love sway over her fidelity.

‘Didn’t I want to nip his infatuation in the bud by warning him that it would be inimical to his marriage as well?’ she began to reconstruct that night’s chain of thoughts. ‘Why, I was certain that he would tuck his tail and run, leaving me alone to overcome my vacillation. How eagerly I waited for his call to unburden his burdensome love, but then, how cleverly he foiled my plan! Didn’t he say that his wife was pragmatic as well as practical althrough, and now that he had crossed sixty and she was well past fifty, he was certain that she was bound to turn a blind eye to our autumn love? Why couldn’t I prepare a counter for that? Didn’t I, on the other hand, love his mischievous speculation that his wife might even welcome our healthy adultery? What an audacity? So to say, didn’t he pulverize my resistance to his courting that was so joyous any way? How thrilling it was to be nicknamed Sexy-Ms and, how titillating were those prolonged telephonic conversations that followed! Oh, how his recollections of my sly exposures became music to my ears to lift my spirits!’

Thereafter, deluding herself about the innocence of her harmless romance, she came to abandon herself on the flirtatious path. Soon, however, as he tried to press her into a liaison, she panicked no end, and at the next turn, she stunned him with an ‘I told my husband’ lie and he hung up in dismay with her ‘below the belt’ hit.

‘Didn’t he say it is one thing to lead a man up the garden path and another to push him into an abyss of shame?’ presently she began recalling his words tearfully. ‘Though he was dying for her possession, yet he could live without her love but it was hard for him to live with the thought that she belittled it before her husband.’

She always wondered why his sense of hurt didn’t dent her senseless fidelity then and there! She was shocked at his loss but felt relieved as well for the breakup put her back on the familiar track of unwavering fidelity. But, soon, as she began missing him even in the precincts of the temples, she strengthened her resolve with a sense of triumph over the devil of infidelity. So she tried to put the vacillations of her mind behind to put her life back on the sedative course. However, her sense of guilt for having unfairly hurt him never left her. Besides, as her husband’s ‘ever on the raise’ cussedness only helped increase her sense of alienation from him, she began to see the futility of fidelity itself. As that insensibly tipped the scale of her life towards the autumn of love, she sent him that belated invitation for union.

‘Have I lost him before I had him?’ she thought, once again staring at his message on her phone’s screen. ‘What am I to do to win his over? Well, have I got to do anything at all than merely waiting for his call? How long can he hold himself at the threshold of possession? But what if his sense of hurt singed his passion for my possession? Whatever, there is no way I can lose him, I’ve to cut the Gordian knot myself and quickly at that. Once I confess that I lied about making my husband privy to his passion, won’t that address his main grouse against me? Of course it would. Why won’t his passion come to the fore, once I dispel the clouds of hurt? Worse come worse, won’t I be able to sway him by gate crashing? Well, even if nothing works, won’t my life be still alive with the pulsations of love. Let me see what life has in store for me.’

She picked up the phone to provide fillip to her life. Preeti Shenoy’s prompt [*]

Story 6

A Touchy Affair

In the middle of the flight, Kiara woke up to go to the washroom. When she returned, she was too lazy to push her way into the middle seat. And with Rishaan readily offering to shift seats, the seating arrangement changed. With 20 minutes still remaining for the flight to land, a sleep-starved Kiara took another power nap, this time holding Rishaan's right hand more firmly. Rishaan's other hand, though, nervously moved to touch Diya's. Her heart skipped a beat. Diya pulled her hand away. But a defiant Rishaan held her wrist again, this time firmly and more reassuringly. The changing behavioral dynamics between the three perhaps gave out a foreboding of what to come in Goa. [*]

When the flight landed at the Dabolim Airport, Rishaan felt uncanny. His excitement seemed replaced by an unknown fear that he found very difficult to decipher. And that made him fall behind the pair as they made it to the baggage section. But during the inordinate wait for their belongings, Diya's tentative glances furthered his longing for her. When it was time to get into a cab, as Diya was at contriving to reserve the seat behind the driver for her, he made bold to brush her bottom to raise the tempo. What with her acquiescing glance propelling out his anxieties, he got into the front seat. Sitting besides the driver, as he turned his head towards her for an all-clear, her eyes emitted green light for him. And as the cabbie began conveying them to her place in Panaji, his train of thoughts led him to Delhi, where it all began.

Rishaan first met Kiara when he crossed thirty and she was nearing twenty-five. That was at the Delhi High Court, where he was an upcoming counsel, and she, a promising junior lawyer. What with his starry-eyed demeanor setting up their stray encounters on an enamoured course and her reciprocal glances catapulting them onto the romantic stage, they tied the knot before the corridor gossip could acquire a scandalous tenor. Even as they were twice over the seven-year itch twice the year before, as her man leaned towards another woman, the thirty-year old Diya got under Kiara's legal wings. When he was introduced to Diya, a decent-looking project head in Oa-Sys, she did not sweep him off his feet and he too could not stir her heart. However, with the formation of their friendship triangle, he began to nuance Diya's nubile charms based on her marvelous seat, and yet, his loin was never on fire for Diya's possession. Maybe weighed down by grief, as her heart too didn't stir to a romantic beat, in spite of their close proximity, they remained sexually languid.

'But how pleasurable is this nascent longing!' he thought turning his head towards Diya as if to gauge it in her demeanour, and finding her eyes in wait to espy his full visage, elated, he resumed his reminiscences.

When the court decreed her divorce, Diya wanted to begin her life afresh in her ancestral home in Panaji, and wished Kiara and he should be the midwives, as she put it. Like the infusion of oil imparts a fresh glow to a diya, as her new-found love for life had injected sensuality into her persona, he was readily besotted with the new woman in her. Ever since they boarded the flight at Palam that noon, he was possessed with an irresistible urge for her touch, and as Kiara's innocuous move paved the way, he closed in on Diya to checkmate her.

'What a touch!' he began marveling at it. 'Wonder how it still lingers! Why Kiara has been no less a woman. Surely there is something in Diya's flesh and blood

specially meant for my bodily needs. Going by her reaction, there could be an element in my body chemistry that catalyzes her arousal.”

As he turned his head towards her, as if for confirmation, her demeanour suggested that she too was thinking on similar lines.

“Rishaan isn’t the scenery uniquely different?” said Kiara ecstatically

“Yes, yes,” he said fumbling.

“But the soul of Goa is in its beaches,” said Diya.

“So, I’m a lost soul’ said Kiara in jest.

“Why so?” said Diya.

“I have water phobia.” said Kiara.

“What about our Kiara-half?” said Diya drawling on our.

“Wait until we reach the beach,’ he said turning his head, “and what about you?”

“You know I’m a Goan-girl, I mean woman,” she said drawling on woman.

When they reached Diya’s place to her parents’ elaborate welcome, Diya motioned the guests upstairs, saying smilingly, ‘you are welcome to carry your bag and baggage’. After ushering them into the sprawling guestroom, she showed them her modest bedroom. When they went downstairs freshened up, they were feasted with fresh seafood to satiate their palates. Resting for a while, the trio rushed to Candolim Beach, reaching which, they began walking on the sands, Kiara keeping her feet dry as Rishaan and Diya wetted theirs.

However, as the sun began to set, they joined Kiara to savour the tinned beer they brought along with them in the twilight. And as it became dark, they began their walk back to where it started and in the manner it began, Kiara on the dry beach and the longing on the wet bed. Under the cover of darkness and away from Kiara’s forward gaze, when Rishaan tentatively brushed his shoulder with Diya’s, she firmly leaned on his. As he grasped her hand, they walked hand in hand, letting their fingers convey their urge without their uttering a word of endearment

After a refreshing bath and a couple of Fenis, they all had a sumptuous dinner followed by a long chit-chat with the old couple. It was near midnight when Diya wished her guests good night and retired into her bedroom. While a tipsy Kiara hit the pillow straight away, as sleep deserted the lovesick Rishaan, he went into the corridor accompanied by expectancy. As the light was off in Diya’s room, he went up to the door to see if it was ajar, and finding it locked, he returned to in his bed to grapple with a sleepless night.

With a surging urge to touch Diya, in spite of a disturbed sleep, Rishaan got up early, and after breakfast, the trio proceeded to old Goa to see its heritage churches. When they reached Basilica of Bom Jesus, while Kiara was struck by its architectural splendor, Rishaan, in spite of it, could not take his eyes off Diya. After loitering in and around it for a while, as Diya led them into the sprawling compound of Sé Cathedral of Goa that lay across the road, Kiara preferred to stay put to watch the Basilica from afar. As that gave the lovebirds a free reign in the Cathedral, they entered into it hand in hand and roamed all over with waists in hand, without uttering a word at that. On their stroll back to Kiara, when Diya tumbled to the ground on purpose, as Rishaan began caressing her legs to her delight, she dropped her pallu to feast his eyes.

Back home, they had bellyful, and after siesta the three reached Baga Beach. Even as Rishaan bared his chest and kicked off his pants, Diya stumped him by shedding her long dress to appear in a light brown swimsuit. What with the sight of her bare thighs surging his libido, he looked at Kiara in embarrassment, but finding her looking at the objects of his attraction, he augmented their attention. While Kiara rested on the beachside bed, the eager duo ventured into the waters to begin their offshore adventure. Resurfacing far off from Kiara much later, hand in hand, they lay side by side with sideways-eyes, till darkness drew a curtain between them. Finally, as if signaling a desire to exit and showing direction for entry, in the same vein, Diya raised her long and shapely legs into the air.

After drinks and dinner, as they were about to call it a day, sensing Kiara might turn amorous, winking at Diya, Rishaan feigned sleepy.

Past midnight, when Kiara was fast asleep, as he tiptoed into the corridor, he was greeted by a light beam flashing through Diya's bedroom door that was ajar. When he tentatively peeped into the room, waiting by the door side, as she firmly pulled him into her embrace, he knew it would be an enduring thing. As he was about to compliment her for her ingenious welcome, she sealed his lips with hers as if to suggest that in their amour, pulsations of passion would override the words of adoration. After a deep kiss that nearly choked him, she closed the door to open her body and soul to him, and began to undress herself. Not wanting to suffer the presence of even a shred of clothing in their naked togetherness, he too entered the race to the state of nudity. As they fondled each other in their full-length embrace, they came to exclaim in unison, 'what a touching thing!' With the one-upmanship they showed in indulging with passion thereafter, a gratified Cupid felt obliged to grant them multiple orgasms.

"I love you Rishaan, body and soul," said Diya, resting on his hairy chest.

"Doubt if touch was ever the touchstone of love." he said fondling her shapely back.

"How true, had you not held my hand in the flight, I wouldn't have been lying here fulfilled in love."

"So, touch is the mother of our desire and fulfillment the father of our love,"

"What if Kiara comes to know?" she said suddenly waking up to the reality of life.

"She won't take it kindly, that's for sure."

"Where that would leave me?"

"In case of vacancy, you will be my wife."

"If not, though I wish not."

"That depends on you?"

"I don't mind being the other woman." she said falling into his arms crying. "I can't live without you, hope you don't leave me."

"I feel our unique touch has sealed our fate once and for all."

"An assuring thing in a touchy affair." she said feeling reassured.

"You've put it so well really?"

"No one-upmanship for once," she said initiating an encore.

When Rishaan slipped into the room, finding Kiara in deep sleep, he heaved a sigh of relief only to find himself in soup the next morning.

“Why these?” said Kiara feeling the bruises on his body.

“Don’t you see they are love bites?”

“Have we made love these days?”

“You can count twice as many on Diya’s.”

“Oh, you goddamn cheat.”

“Sorry for the hurt Kiara,” he said trying to take her into his arms.

“Do I deserve this Rishaan?” she said pushing him away.

“We couldn’t avoid it.”

“Okay, let bygones be bygones,” she said gravely.

“We’ve just begun,” he said dreamily.

“So be it, put an end to it, now and here,” she said sounding firm.

“You know there can’t be ready solutions for these,” he said pleadingly.

“Good bye then.”

“Don’t go by knee-jerk reaction,” he said persuasively, “let’s sort it out, by and by.”

“Go to hell.” she screamed. “With her I mean.”

When that Air India’s Boeing took off from Dabolim Airport, while Rishaan sat beside Diya, who occupied the window seat, two rows behind, a brooding Kiara was in an aisle seat.

‘Now there is no point in forcing him to choose between Diya and me as I’m bound to be the loser?’ she thought in resolution. “Why not I let his passion for Diya satiate itself? Don’t they say man always goes back to his wife in the end? Meanwhile, why not I make the best of a bad bargain? It’s sensible really.”

With 20 minutes still remaining for the flight to land, Kiara walked up the aisle to request the man sitting beside Rishaan for a swap of their seats. As he readily obliged, even as Diya clung on to Rishaan’s right hand, Kiara sat beside him holding his left hand.

Tuhin A. Sinha’s prompt [*]

Story 7

Love’s How’s That?

It was still dawn when I stepped out of the cab and walked towards the entry gate of the Delhi Airport. The early morning February air was pleasantly cold.

I was travelling to Bengaluru to attend a college friend’s wedding. It had been four years since we graduated from the same college. The wedding was also going to be a reunion of our batchmates. But what I didn’t know was that the reunion would begin much ahead of time; right in the queue in front of the airline counter.

I was almost sure it was she. Same height! Same long hair! Same complexion! Curiosity had my eyes glued to her. And then about 60-odd seconds later, when she

turned, she proved me right. My ex-girlfriend stood two places ahead of me in that queue. We had never met after the college farewell. [*]

Her face bore the same tinge of sadness that drew me towards her then; maybe a shade or two deeper than before; and certainly more attractive for that than ever. But when our eyes met, as if stirred by her soul, her whole frame got animated. While I stood rooted, unable to take my eyes off her, she gave way to the couple behind her in the queue. When it was our turn to obtain boarding passes, she took hold of my ticket and opted for two seats aside a window. And it was only when we rejoined in the lounge, after going through our separate ways for the security check, that she opened her mouth.

“What a pleasant surprise it is Mohan,” she said extending her hand.

“More so for the accompanying privacy,” I said unable to hide my joy, grabbing her hand.

“I suppose you are going to attend Madhu’s wedding,” she said in all anticipation.

“Now that we’ve met, won’t I walk in your tracks,” I said smilingly.

“Why didn’t you bring your wife along?” she said.

“I don’t know of any ‘wife for hire’ in Delhi, do you?” I said jocularly.

“So, I got the wrong feed then,” she said with an apparent relief that surprised me.

She led me towards a row of vacant seats, and occupying one, she reclined in it as if to demonstrate her state of mind. Sitting beside her, I felt that portended a major turn of events in my life.

“What about your man? I said tentatively.

“Tell me if you know of any ‘husband on hire’ for a divorcee,” she said pointedly.

“I’m sorry,” I said with mixed feelings.

“What for, is it because I’m a divorcee or you can’t find a husband for me?” she said in jest.

“Jokes apart, if I may know, what went wrong?” I said concernedly.

“You may have to wait for that as I can’t complete my story before we board the plane and I can’t continue that in the earshot any,” she said and walked towards the toilets.

When Rathie joined our class midway in B.A pre-final at Hindu College, it was no capital moment for she didn’t cause any sensation on the campus. Yet the elusive charm of her supple frame induced a mild commotion in my heart and with that tinge of sadness on her face began to seep into my soul, I came to develop a crush on her. But as she chose to ignore the emanations of my fascination for her, I was deeply hurt for by then I prided myself on my good looks. Swallowing my pride and subduing my lust, as I befriended her to be near her, she admitted me into her inner circle, albeit drawing a platonic line. As she began receiving me at her home, her mother dropped enough hints that she was in the lookout for a suitable boy for Rathie in the corridors of IIMs. And that put paid to the slim hope that still lingered in my mind about winning her hand in the end. So we had to part on a friendly note as graduates, and shortly thereafter she invited me to her wedding that I chose not to attend.

“Where are you lost?” she said returning from the loo.

“Well, in our woods of remembrances,” I said searching for her reaction.

"It seems the flight could be delayed by an hour or so," she said without betraying her emotions.

"No worry as the wedding is scheduled for the evening," I said disappointed.

"So, be ready with your handkerchief," she said in half-jest.

"Thanks to IndiGo, you can open the floodgates," I said pulling out a handkerchief from my hip pocket.

"In hindsight it was my mother who scripted my marital misery," she said as a prologue to her hapless tale. "Reared as she was in middleclass drudgery, she planted high-class seedling in my childhood bosom that turned into an unbending tree in my adult mindset. I was enamored of you but yet I couldn't entertain the idea of marrying you. As Shekhar fitted the bill, I became his willing bride but just the same, I wished you were at my wedding."

"You don't know what a struggle it was for me to decide one way or the other," I said apologetically.

"Do you think I couldn't have wagered a guess about that?" she said taking my hand, and began resuming her tale after releasing it. "But what I failed to understand then was why Shekhar opted to marry me as he could have picked and chosen any beauty queen."

"Won't that tinge of sadness in your face make you irresistible for men?" I said instinctively.

"Oh, is it so?" she said as her face radiated only to resume resignedly. "Well, he was not the one to nuance the feminine attributes. Instead, he was fixated with the astrological aspects in horoscopes. Do you know why he married me? I came to know later that his astrological guru told him that the planetary positions in the 7th house my horoscope indicated that my spouse would reach the apex of the business pyramid. Now I can figure out with what hopes he would have rented that house in Hyderabad, as a prelude to his entry into the haloed chambers of a blue chip company. You can't imagine the astrological lengths to which he tended to go; he's wont to take leave of absence during the predicted bad periods. As a result, he had to give way to his subordinate to ascend the administrative ladder. With his dreams thus shattered, he alleged that my parents had fabricated my horoscope and abused me for being the curse of his career. And that was the final nail in our marital coffin."

"What have you been doing ever since?" I said placing my hand on her shoulders.

"I returned to Delhi and to my parents to take up the fulltime job of fighting for my divorce. What an ordeal it had been for two years to obtain a decree that was on hand only a fortnight back. In a way, this trip is meant to celebrate my release. Now, tell me about your life," she said taking my hand.

"This is Mohan Kumar, B.A, LLB, a Junior Counsel at the Delhi High Court, and no more," I said symbolically withdrawing my hand from hers.

"Had I known that, I could've entrusted my case to you and maybe you would've set me free much earlier," she said smilingly.

Soon we boarded the Boeing and tried to delve into the fictional world, she with Crossing the Mirage and I with Benign Flame. What with Rathi's enhanced sex appeal stirring my own sensuality, I closed the book, unable to grasp the nuances of Roopa's sexuality dwelt in it. But as she was seemingly immersed in her book, without batting an eyelid, I began savoring her seductive persona. In time, as I was seized by an urge

to possess her, I felt like proposing to her then and there. But I checked myself as that might seem that I was trying to take advantage of her disadvantaged position. Even otherwise, how could I measure up to her high-class aspiration? Why invite a rejection all again, I thought, and so I became once bitten twice shy. Yet I couldn't help but let my eyes follow her frame all the way from Bengaluru Airport to the Koramangala Motel, where we were lodged along with our batchmates, who came in numbers.

It was a gala wedding by any standards of the day and also the bride was no less rotund than the prevailing trend. Even as Rathi was appropriated by the groom's family, I was overwhelmed by our batchmates. And that depressed as well as relived me in the same vein. As our return trip proved to be an encore, as we waited for baggage clearance, I knew the time was up for me to go back to square one.

"Why not we have lunch at our place?" she said taking me by surprise.

"I would love that but.. " I said as that didn't sound like a formal invite.

"Don't worry, as my mom no longer eulogizes MBAs, and who knows, now she many sing paeans for LLBs," she said extending her hand.

I took her hand and, hand in hand, we walked out of the Delhi Airport.

Ravinder Singh's prompt [*]

Story 8

A Hearty Turn

"Are you sure, Rhea?" asked my mother.

"Of course, I'm. Survival of the fittest, mother. I'm not going against Darwin. Also I don't want unnecessary scars on my body."

It's a known fact that we are all born to die. And frankly, I don't understand why it has to be made into such a big deal. If it were not for my mother, I would have said that to the bunch of people outside my house, some of them with young kids, shouting slogans, waving placards, literally wanting me to cut one of my beating hearts out. "Save A Life. Donate!" they shout.

For someone, who is one in billions, 7.125 billion to be exact, I expect to be treated better. Scientists are still befuddled regarding my condition that gave me two hearts in my mother's womb. But years of research and sticking needles into me have led them nowhere, and they have labeled me as a freak mutation. It's so rare – literally one in all humankind - that they didn't even name the anomaly (as they call it, I will call it awesomeness). I want to name the condition myself, something on the lines of Rhea's Heartsawsome but the doctors aren't thrilled with the suggestion. Instead they want to cut one of them out and save a life. Huh?

An IQ of 180, increased concentration, exceptional athleticism and phenomenal metabolism rate – are just the few boring benefits of an increased blood circulation. Why would I ever give that up? [*]

That's how I began my tale to Dr. Ramya, about my age, at the Kidney Research and Rehabilitation Center at Kodur, and for better effect, followed it while undergoing dialysis. With a purpose that is.

Those slogans still ring in my ears though it happened some ten years back when I was twenty-something. It's when my twin-hearts were fronting the fountainhead of

my Rand-inspired head, that's what it was like. But now my kidneys can't even handle half of that outflow, how times change! If only my father were alive then! Wouldn't he have backed me to the hilt? That's what fathers are for daughters. Don't we have psycho analysis about that, but that's beside the point. Why, even my mother wouldn't have toyed with that idea, so to say, in normal times. But then, she had to contend with her widowhood and the insecurity it brought along with it. Damn the sense of insecurity, the source of insensitivity, at least part of it. So she envisaged bartering my hearty thing for her secured living. And to be fair to her, she revealed her mundane self without putting on a Samaritan garb over it. But did she really, was it a full disclosure. I doubt. Since the needy fellow was a Bollywood star, wouldn't she have eyed some elderly role for herself as a badi bahu or a choti maa on the celluloid that is? Well past her prime then, she was still good enough to enamour even younger eyes, and she hasn't lost much, as of now. If only she could've made it to the silver screen then, who knows, she could be adorning it, some way or the other, even now. Why won't that hold a great promise to my mate in lovemaking? Be that as it may, I played foul with that which could've been an antonym for a double whammy for her. Yet she didn't bear any grudge against me, on that count at least.

Even as I poured water over my mother's calculations, how the mob at our gates swelled by the day to overwhelm me! With what fury they began baying for my surplus heart, as they saw it. And they were all members of that star's assorted fan clubs fanned all over. All financed by him, of course, any doubt about that. That's not all. The electronic media went overboard in solidarity, ostensibly with its eyes firmly glued on the TRPs. And the celluloid intellectuals and the social activists began vying with each other to juxtapose the star's philanthropic largesse and my surplus meagerness. Pig heads all. Why one hyper-active TV anchor even dubbed it as my double-hearted weak-heartedness, and no marks for guessing who. Not content with all that, legions of the star's million fans took to Facebook to bleed my hearts all over it. It's a mob mob world. So it seems.

Then appeared that fateful post on that very website, "None would've cared a damn for Rhea's second heart, if it were to save the life of a slighted soul, not that of a soulless star." Well it's an allusion to that actor's off-screen omissions and commissions. As that propped up my tenuous position, I initiated spirited chat with him that is without a slightest idea that he could be an imposter! I should've known all that glitters is not gold. Lo, he led me to his bed behind the back of his wife that is. That I came to know much later that is as he started avoiding me. What irked me was not the loss of the silly virginity that society wants us women to preserve for the sake of an unknown man. That is until he turns up as husband. But then, it's his deception without contraception that blackened my face before my mother. Seems like life is merciless to those who fall by its wayside, but thankfully, my mother didn't make it any worse for me. Well, she left the choice to me. It's not that I was averse to becoming a single mother but I had no stomach to bear that bastard's bastard child; so I climbed onto the table.

But what an irony the symbolism of abuse is; even if its object is the male, yet its subject is ever the female! As my mother's tenderness, contrasting his crudeness, gave birth to my softness to the fair sex, I insensibly began to develop lesbian leanings. It's as if my mother gave birth to me twice, first as a girl and then as a lesbian. Two hearts and two births! How freak! And yet it took a veteran to spot my proclivity and make me adept at handling the hardware and the software of it. It's all latent in women but it takes the favour of life to make it more than fantasizing, so it seems. Sadly my first love met with an untimely death but not before ensuring the

flame she lit would forever sing in me. My later mates, few and far between, left me at some stage, opting for a male, in marriage that is. Who knows, they saw lesbianism as safe pre-marital sex, and there is merit in it. If only one of them was a misandrist like me, it would have a different story. But why fate brought me all the way from Mumbai to Kodur, and to its Helen in abstinence, may make a different story.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before?” she said

“It’s only a corollary to your story told yesterday,” I said.

Raghu was three years senior to Ramya in the Kodur Medical College, where ragging was traditionally bawdy. When she stepped into the campus that morning, he was the first to step up to her. As she was at a loss as to how to handle her first encounter, he counseled her how to take it in its stride. He said he abhorred the idea of ragging as he felt it’s a violation of human rights but conceded that there was no way he could help her avoid it. And that set the tone for the love tunes of their long courtship. Soon after her graduation, they tied the knot, but, owing to her miscarriages, they had to give up the idea of augmenting their union. With both of them specializing in nephrology and endowed with his family wealth, they set up the Kidney Research and Rehabilitation Center. Though conceived to cater to the ailments of the locals, in a short time, it grew in size as it gained on reputation. And that was owing to his attitude to perfect and her zeal to excel.

While she was sorry she couldn’t make him a father, and even before they could adopt a child, fate made her his widow. The drunk driver who rammed a goods carrier into his Santro was aghast at realizing that he caused the death of the doctor who had given a new lease of life to his wife. That was two years back. While the repentant driver is serving the sentence, vowing to fight against drunken driving after his release, she had taken his wife as an ayah at the hospital.

Her parents and in-laws alike want her to remarry but she was averse to the idea of a fresh nuptial for the possibility of it bringing into her life a lesser soul than the departed one. But as she wasn’t able to overcome her craving for a companion, she was truly in a dilemma, to be or not to be a bride again. When we met, she felt like I filled the emotional void in her life. But diagnosing the impending threat my heart-excess posed to my life that is besides being the bane of my kidneys, she was wary of losing me to go back to square one. But yet she thanked God, with all her heart, for placing me in her expert care to try and secure me for her sake.

So she flew heart surgeons from Mumbai post-haste to sever that which I held dear to save a pregnant woman. She was glad that my other full (that’s her phrase) saved not one but two lives, besides mine that is. By the way, as the beneficiary was not a male, that didn’t tickle the misandrist in me. As for my scar, she saw it’s akin to a plaque that kings of yore laid to symbolize their exploits, and wanted to have one for her by donating her kidney to me, even as I have another receiving hers.

“Yet you may remarry, why scar your body?” I said to test the waters.

“I told you I’m not inclined,” she said.

“But it’s difficult to resist a right guy, right.”

“Maybe, but ...?” she sounded tentative.

“Didn’t Oscar Wilde say the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it?” I said invitingly.

“A tempting proposition from a temptress,” she said laughingly.

“Wordplay apart...” I began tentatively

“Why beat around the bush,” she said meaningfully

“Who’s doing that?” I said looking straight into her eyes.

“Both of us I suppose,” she said caressing my head.

“Who’s to break the ice?” I said.

“It’s my turn I think,” she said leading me into her chamber.

She confessed that it’s the intimacy my post-operative care afforded her that came to induce lesbian leanings in her. Though she envisioned our union as her life time solution, given my situation, she hid her enamour, clothing it in camaraderie. So she sought my professional assistance at the hospital and friendly closeness at home as a prelude to our lesbian bonding. When I grabbed both with both hands, she was wondering how to play her hand. Well my full disclosure provided her the trump card.

“What a hearty turn?” I said spreading my arms in invitation.

“Until death us part,” she said sinking in my embrace that I tightened symbolically.

Durjoy Datta's prompt [*]

Story 9

Love Jihad

Syed and Gayatri didn’t mean to fall in love. But love happens when you least expect it. It creeps up suddenly. When someone needs attention, care, conversation, laughter and maybe intimacy. Love doesn’t look at logic or at backgrounds and least of all religion.

Gayatri was from a very conservative South Indian family that went to a temple every Saturday. Syed brought goats to his family every Eid. That said it all. Their paths would never have crossed if it hadn’t been for that fateful day. That day when he walked into the coffee shop. Gayatri wondered if destiny chose our loved ones for us. Did we have any role to play at all?

She looked at her watch. Syed was late. They met every Thursday at five pm to catch up. Their conversation lasted for hours. Sometimes in the café, sometimes in his car, sometimes in places that she could never tell her friends about. They would never understand. And yet Syed made her happy.

Suddenly her phone beeped. He had sent a message. “On my way. Have something important to tell you.”

Gayatri stared at it and realized she had knots in her stomach. Thoughts flooded her mind. What did he want to tell her? [*] Will he propose? Or back out? Didn’t he say his people are highly religious? Wouldn’t they’ve put their foot down? She racked her brains at that, and bogged down by anxiety, her mind became numb. She sank into her seat and closed her eyes as though to crystal gaze. Soon, unable to cool her nerves in any which way she came of the café and waited for Syed at the gates. It’s as if she was trying to cut short her anxiety. When she spotted his car, in time, she waved at him furiously, and jumped into it as he opened the door for her.

“Tell me,” she said settling by his side.

“Let’s first get into the café,” he said.

"Tell me here and now," she insisted.

"It's at half-way," he said tentatively.

"Why talk in circles!" she said exasperated.

"Do you mind being Ayesha to be my bride?" he said hesitantly.

"Why, what's wrong with Gayatri?" she said tentatively.

"You know how I love your name but," he began apologetically.

"What ifs and buts of love?" she said cutting him short.

"Don't think its love jihad on the sly."

"Don't I know you're Syed Sikandar Mirza?"

"I'm for civil marriage but my father insists upon nikah."

"What does that mean?"

"You've to convert into Islam."

"What if I assume that pseudonym for nikah?" she said after reflecting for a while.

"I thought about it myself but they say nikah is for the believing couple," he said helplessly.

"So, I must become a Muslim to be your wife, right."

"That's what they say."

"What do you say?" she said looking into his eyes.

"I'm in a dilemma."

"I know about you but I don't know about Islam."

"You know I'm not a practicing type."

"But still, a bits and pieces Muslim, as I'm a bits and pieces Hindu."

"I can't put it any better and I'm sure we'll remain that way."

"So I believed, as Syed and Gayatri but not as Syed and Ayesha."

"Believe me; it won't make any difference," he said taking her hand.

"Let me think about it," she said withdrawing her hand.

As she sat beside him with eyes closed, he kept riveted his eyes on her in anxiety.

"Take me to the Higginbothams," she said at last. "I want to know what Islam is all about."

"That's my Gayatri," he said admiringly.

"Not Ayesha, as yet," she said smilingly.

When they reached the bookshop, she asked him to guide her but as he expressed his ignorance about things religious, she rummaged through the book shelves and picked up Marmaduke Pickthall's Holy Koran, Martin Ling's biography of Muhammad, Roland E Miller's Muslim Friends - Their faith and feeling, An introduction to Islam and Puppets of Faith: Theory of Communal Strife by BS Murthy. As though on cue, Syed followed suit and zeroed in on The Upanisads by Valerie J. Roebuck and Bhagvad-Gita: Treatise of Self-help by BS Murthy.

After a minor scuffle over footing the bill, and having agreed to make presents out of them to each other, they drove back to 'their' favourite café. While they sipped their coffee, seeing her leaf through the Quran, he saw the irony of the scripture he himself hadn't read held the key to his love-life, and that amused him. When the waiter brought the bill, showing an unusual eagerness to move out, she said smilingly that she would allow him to settle it 'out of turn'. Sensing her intent to pore over the books before all else, Syed said, in half-jest, that he was jealous of her 'bookish love'.

"Blame faith for poking its nose into love," she said in repartee.

"Wish we were born into the same faith, whatever it is."

"Then, instead of my lover's religious texts, I would be reading his love letters," she said smilingly.

"You know I'm not much into reading but love seems to have other ideas," he said picking up his pack of books as the waiter brought the balance amount.

"Don't they say love is god, let's see if it's true," she said getting up.

Having agreed upon a hiatus till she had a grasp of Islam, he dropped her near her Ladies' Hostel.

Over the next two months, reading those books she made notes, and having made up her mind in the end, she called up Syed for a meet. When she set out to the coffee shop, even as she was conscious that she may not be as excited at seeing him as before, nevertheless, she was eager to see how he would react upon seeing her. As they met, both found each other in a reflective mood, and as they settled down at a corner table, she thought it fit not to beat around the bush.

"Being a Muslim, you tend to take Islam for granted but it's natural for me to weigh it on merits," she said pulling out her notes from her valet. "You may know Hinduism was in existence much before Allah revealed the straight path to Muhammad but nowhere in the Quran is there a reference to Hindus. That is, even as He exhorts Muslims to be wary of the Jews, the Christians (peoples of the Book fallen afoul of Him) and the idolaters; don't tell me the idolaters Allah meant in the Quran were Hindus for in the context of Muhammad's life and times, they were Meccans who worshiped idols at Kaba. It's evident that what Allah had revealed to your prophet was meant for the idolatrous Arabs of that time, more or less on the same lines of the Torah and the Gospel that He earlier gave to the Jews and the Christians. And that too was in the nearby land. If you gaze at Islam through the Hindu prism, it would not seem a universal religion but something like a Shaivism or a Vaishnavism, both cults of Hinduism. Surely, Quran's sectarianism precludes Islam to be labeled a world religion (she read from her notes)

"O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends. They are friends one to another. He among you who taketh them for friends is (one) of them. Lo! Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk."

"They long that ye should disbelieve even as they disbelieve, that ye may be upon a level (with them). So choose not friends from them till they forsake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back (to enmity) then take them and kill them wherever ye find them, and choose no friend nor helper from among them."

"I suppose, there can't be any intellectual disagreement over it," he said overwhelmed.

“I’m glad you’ve agreed; had you differed, I couldn’t have faulted,” she said and continued. “You may know that Hindus proclaim Lord Rama as maryada purushottama, an ideal man, and leave it at that but I understand that Muslim men not only consider Muhammad an exemplary man but also strive to emulate him. And from woman’s point of view that bothers me. Rama was not only monogamous but also vouched by the sanctity of marriage but Muhammad, besides being polygamous was not wedded to the idea of marriage. His dalliance with Mariyah in spite of a dozen living wives, including Ayesha the young thing, is illustrative of that.”

“No denying it from a woman’s POV,” he said admiringly.

“That’s not all,” she continued spiritedly, “my dharma and culture, never mind the aberrations, grant women social freedoms that I’ve come to enjoy. What’s more, the Hindu winds of social change are going to pickup by the year. But with burka and all, same is not the case with Islam, and what’s worse, Salafism is at pushing the umma into medieval Islamic times. Who knows, once I convert, if I’m compelled to move in the tent of a burka, where I would go then? Besides, my Muslim daughter would be a poor cousin of her otherwise Hindu sibling. Don’t I owe modernity to my posterity?”

“Of course, we do,” he said.

“So, you’re agreeing to disagree.”

“No, I’ve disagreed to agree with my religion,” he said smilingly, and continued in a serious tone. “I was struck by what I’ve read in Brihadaaranyaka Upanishad and by hearted some of the same, ‘since man created gods who are better than he: and also because, being mortal, he created immortals, it is his higher creation. Whoever knows this, comes to be in this, his higher creation’. After completing The Upanisads and Bhagvad-Gita, as I began reading the books you were reading, I could see my prophet in a new light and the Koran in its true context. Now I see Islam as an Arabic sectarian cult but not an egalitarian religion of the world, and that made me help my family to shed much of their Muslim overburden.”

“So,” she said.

“Gayatri weds Syed,” he said extending his hand.

“If Islam is another ‘ism’ of Hinduism in our sweet home,” she said holding back her hand.

“Imbibing the ideals of maryada purushottama,” he said taking her hand.

“And that will be our love jihad,” she said pressing his hand.

Madhuri Banerjee’s prompt [*]

Story 10

Tenth Nook

It was the first thought that came to her as she woke up. He was gone. And, soon, this bedroom, the house in whose eastern corner it sat, and the tiny garden outside with its gnarled old red hibiscus and the half-grown mango tree they had planted together, all those would be gone as well. It was the strangest feeling ever. [*]

It was as though she could hear the receiver’s knock at the door, followed by the echoes of the auction bids – eighty-five lakhs, ninety lakhs, ninety-five lakhs.... , she could hear no more. That was until the hammer struck, sounding the beginning of the

end of her innings at Tenth Nook. And to herald her return to her parental place that he nicknamed Square Peg, her square one from which he promised to take her to the Seventh Heaven. Of course, he did take her there, never mind the means.

"Why am I bogged down with this man-made thing without a thought for the man who made it all happen," she thought on second-thought. "He's only to be blamed for that. Why not, he's the one who maligned my mind with materialism, didn't he? Or is it Mammon who had seduced my soul to the core? But how does that mater any way. He did desert me at the first post of adversity and that's what matters. How shameful. Is it cowardice or callousness? How am I to know? Let him go to hell and I'll brave it out regardless. But what about our kids, won't they be worse off, left in the lurch?"

The thought of their children, a boy and a girl, twins, aged twelve, led her to their first-floor bedroom of their duplex dwelling.

"Oh how he raised their hopes sky-high!" she thought on her way. "Didn't he tell her he was cutting corners for their crowning future. Doubtful, after all this, isn't it? No doubt it's his vanity to cut a figure for himself and his family that could've been at the back of his mind all through. That much is clear in the hindsight, isn't it? But what about me, am I not equally guilty? Well, that's the fallacy of falsity that we shared but this is the burden of deceit he thrust upon me, really. But am I any less callous than him when it came to our kids? Being a mother, shouldn't I have been more concerned about them than him? But how do I measure up? He left all of us with equal abandon but lo, I'm worried only about losing the dwelling! Did I think about their plight all this while? Shameful, isn't it? Could it be the material loss that obscured my maternal vision? Maybe, it's their bleak future that benumbed my mind. Why this hypocrisy? It could be both, what's the hell about it. But what a double jeopardy, twice over that is!"

Seeing her children asleep on a bare floor, as tears gushed out of her eyes, she checked herself as though afraid of inundating them in a flashflood.

"Am I not privy to their deprivations for long?" she thought. "And yet his largesse turned our ancestral dwelling into a two-storied building. That was in his heydays. Won't it help us tide over the rough tide of life now? Was it his foresight or just one of life's ironies! But still, if I had a sibling or two that would've made a difference. Yet, how can I sustain their dream of becoming doctors? Who knows? Living in that Square Peg, did I ever dream of Tenth Nook? Maybe it's all about destiny, regardless of modesty of birth. Won't my life prove that, what a journey it had been from there to the zenith?"

Born and brought up in a canalside dwelling in an agrarian village, she was the only child of her parents, who cultivated assorted vegetables in their meager backyard that barely sustained them. Thanks to her scholarship, she got a degree in arts from the government college in a nearby town, where she wanted to take up a job to support the family. While her mother was averse to the idea for its attendant perils and as her father found it hard to clear the dowry hurdle, she stayed put at home. But life seemed to ensure that love had its share as well as say in matchmaking.

One fine morning, she noticed a youth ogling her from her neighbour's place; obviously he was a visitor and probably their relative. Though enamored of him, out of shyness, she kept herself aloof all day long. But driven by anticipation, she ventured out in the evening as if to meet his expected advances, and kept vigil on her neighbour's house. That is reading some romantic novel while resting her back on a coconut tree in her front yard. When she lowered her guard absorbed in the story,

unknown to her, he gave her the slip to sketch her picture in her romantic posture. As he approached her with his artwork, alerted by his shadow to his impending presentation, getting up reflexively, she stood there nervously. When he introduced himself by the pseudonym of a budding short-story writer she happened to admire, as she stared at him wide-eyed, he made bold to present her that picture perfect. How thrilled she was at seeing her likeness in his work, and how glamorous he seemed to her enamoured eyes for being an artist besides an author!

He was city bred, though on a poor diet, like hers. But for a sense of exaggerated self-worth, he had no vice to name. The little fame that a few short stories earned him made him believe that it was demeaning for him to work under someone. Thus even as his bloated ego and the meager means denied him to gain a foothold in life, his foolhardy made him daydream about unassailable heights. But his freelancing didn't take him far and so he remained an ineligible bachelor, in spite of his admirable demeanour. That was when fate brought him near her, and life took over to make them man and wife. But not before she battled for him hard and true on her home turf.

Her parents felt her beauty, eclipsed though by poverty, would enable her to punch above their weight; so they were not enthused about his offer to take her hand. Moreover, they felt her ascending the altar with him was like falling from the frying pan into the fire itself. But as she was bent upon seeking the pleasure of passing through the pathless woods with her fancied man, they relented to let her become his woman, and so led them to the kalyana mandapam of the village temple.

"And what a life it had been!" she recalled her early times with him. "How weary our legs were in our wild goose chase for a 'To Let' board of some cheap and best place. Could we believe our luck clinching that outhouse on rent? What a dream place it was, set in a garden, in the heart of the city at that! Maybe, it's beyond anyone's dreams. Can't believe, how much space we provided for happiness in that tiny abode to make it our happy home! That was being hand to mouth, and when there was nothing on hand, how we used to cater to our pangs of hunger! Come to think of it, with each other's saliva in never-ending deep kisses! Can any better it? (She paused for a while as the thought of it whetted her memory) What a flattering feeling it was seeing him write intriguing tales out of my story ideas, and how fulfilling were those moments to hear him say that I was the soul of his muse. And when we were blessed with the twins, didn't we feel it symbolized the union of our division? Sadly, all that changed with the avarice he acquired, well, with the helping hand of his acquired fame."

As fate would have it, the corrupt "head" of the health department, of the state government, lost his large heart to her man's short-stories. Seeing his idol in near penury, the 'head' felt, deep in his heart, that it was a blasphemy of goddess Saraswati. So, he took it upon himself to redress the wrong, so to say, and misusing his official discretion, he bestowed upon her man the 'concept and creation' of publicity material; that's at an exorbitant cost with decent cut for himself. And as her man, in an act of one-upmanship, over-invoiced the supplies, the 'head' was too pleased to nod his head as though exaggeration was a writer's birthright.

While the 'head' diverted the bulk of the budget money for 'publicity', they lost no time to live even beyond their newfound wealth. He borrowed heavily to build Tenth Nook to make it the envy of the nouveau riche neighborhood. What's more, donning Aramanis, as he flaunted his Rolexes and Mont Blancs, she was bejeweled from head to foot, that's besides being the best dressed dame in the lane. Neither did they

deprive their children in any manner what so ever. However, alerted by their profligacy, the lenders began pressing for the return of the principal amounts, and that put pressure on him. And to tide over the crisis, he mortgaged Tenth Nook to replicate the modus operandi in the portals of the central government. And that turned out to be a golden mirage they chased together.

While he borrowed more to bribe his way for a foothold in the centre, he lost his ground in the state itself as those 'left out' by the 'head' brought their political clout together to bust him and blacklist her man. That was their just deserts. And that's not all, as the leaches-turned-lenders sucked all her jewellery, she became bare necked, bereft of even her mangala sutras. Was it portended, sentiment apart? Maybe that he was gone just scribbling 'SORRY' on their bedroom wall? Unable to believe her eyes, how she thought it was just his prank. But when the reality dawned on her, how scary she became? The hurt he caused and the scar it left, she only knew.

"What's next?" she tried to gaze into the crystal ball. "Back to Square Peg for now, but what's from then on. Will he come back, once the dust settles down? Given his vanity, it's unlikely. After all, he may not like to show his black face to us, ever. But what if he returns? The kids may still love him, but can I have him? I might, for old times' sake that is if he comes back in time and not after he became a thing of the past. But then how long is 'in time'? That's for life to decide. Let me see what it has in store for me."

Jaishree Misra's prompt [*]

Story 11

Eleventh Hour

All of us live with our past. All of us allow it to shape our future. But some of us know how to shrug the past. I think that is who I am, [*] Chitra by name. But what if past catches up with the present? Well, as the moment of reckoning is dilemma, before I come to that, I will take you to my past.

When I completed my course in fashion designing, fate seems to have patterned the woof and weft of my love life that was a score of years back. Landing up with my first job in a reputed company, so to say, I landed in Gopal's lap. He was smart and handsome, witty and humorous, enough to enamour women that's besides his conversational skills. Well, if man dents woman's heart with darts of his eyes, it's the tenor of his words that grips her mind. So, at the threshold of seduction, words are weapons of conquest for men that pierce the chinks in women's armour of chastity! Whether it was his conquest of me or my surrender to him that tended our union is immaterial to my love but it is material to his morals.

As he began courting me, I started taking solo rides into a dream world that is besides our long drives into the wilderness on the outskirts. How the prospect of life as his spouse seemed a dream in itself? Why not, yet to cross thirty, he was the head of fabric design of a blue chip company. Does man's status add aura to woman's love? If so, is love as pristine as poets tend to picture it? Or is it that women have an innate weakness for successful men? What about man's love, isn't it beauty leaning? The bard said that beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold and it can as well be said that it influenceth men to alter their amour. It's not as if women give a damn for man's looks, maybe some of them do, why, isn't it said that some dames prefer ugly men. Lo, some men, rare though, are taken to mustachioed women, oh, what a messy

human emotion, this so called love! Then why blame love for its fallibilities? And yet, if urgency for possession symbolizes man's love for woman, her prudence lay in not putting the cart before the horse, so it seems. If woman were to serve man on a premarital platter, won't she let herself bereft of that for which he would die to tie the knot with her? And marriage is no guarantee either for her to keep her man all for herself, as men, rarely, if ever, fail to explore the avenues of fornication for sexual exploitation. And that's what Gopal did. That I realized long after I lost my virginity to him.

As he averred that he was constrained to lead me to the altar forthwith for his only sister was yet to be married, I believed him as that's the prevailing custom. That's fine, but what was fatal in the end was his proposition that it made no sense to waste time before our nuptial time. Yet what a time we have had on the sly till I discovered, on that accursed day, that I was but his other woman; or was it a moment of deliverance from his deceit? When I happened to see him from afar with a woman and two kids in a cinema hall, I thought she could be his cousin of sorts. Not wanting to embarrass him, I refrained from approaching them, but settling behind them, well after the movie began, I couldn't take my eyes off them. Courtesy the kids, it didn't take me long to know that she was Usha his wedded wife. What with my decency of not hurting her overpowering my instinct to shame him, I left the theatre to bring the curtains down on our affair. Back home, I reflected hard and long as to how to deal with him. First I was tempted to get even with him by pulling him up for his shameful act but on second thought I felt it was too lenient a sentence for his utter perfidy. That way, he would know why I walked out on him. But what if I put in my papers to leave him in the lurch guessing as to why I had left him; was it owing to my discovery of his double life or did I ditch him for he never knows why.

Shrugging off the past, though I readily wedded Murali, it took me a while to shed the baggage of guilt from his bed. Though it made no difference to the physicality of our sex, as it bogged me down in the emotionality of coition, I could see that past is the future of the present. Added to that was Murali's confession about his own past – an unfructified love between him and his classmate owing to her parents' superior status. Thinking it prudent to keep mine away from him and determined not to let the sapphire of my life turn literally blue, I began applying my mind.

What's the big deal about premarital sex that woman should feel self-condemned when men shirk if off after they jerk it out? But then why do women tend to linger on to the sexual acts, emotionally that is? Is it because they are the recipients of male cum in their female receptacles? And what about the sexually adventurous dames, after all there could be some, though none of them can get away like Catherine the Great that is after boasting about bedding with hundred lovers, or whatever was the number. By any chance was it the source of her greatness, I shall Google that later. What a variety it could've been for the queen of yore in comparison with the sex workers of the day, well, isn't it like comparing apples with oranges? Surely, the queen could've chosen her mates but the whores can't deny any Tom, Dick and Harry, even as they can pick and choose, and that's man's world in woman's backyard. How strange! When it comes to parity in sexual choices, won't legalizing sex-work make it a level playing field for women? So went my reasoning for sexual smooth sailing in my marital bed that fetched two off springs.

When all seemed settled but for children's settlement, how has my past caught up with me today to usher in this moment of dilemma, that too in a novel way, beyond the realms of fiction itself. When I returned home at an unscheduled time, I was

surprised to find Binny in the corridor of our fourth-floor apartment, and what's more it kept on pulling at my pallu as if to prevent me from unlocking the door. Perplexed at its uncharacteristic behavior, as I entered the bedroom, lo, what I saw - Murali in an uncompromising position with a striking woman. How taken aback I was seeing that scene, well, taken aback, but not disgusted! Strange, isn't it? Maybe I couldn't believe my eyes for once as he never gave me any reason to suspect his fidelity all these years. So, I withdrew into the drawing room wondering why I didn't barge into them.

While I still in a state of disbelief, at length, they entered the drawing room, hand in hand, and, so to say, the boot was transferred to the other leg. Dumbfounded, as he fumbled for apologies for his perfidy, I was sizing the woman who seemed to be familiar. When he said she was Usha his old flame, I could place her as Gopal's wife and saw the irony of it all. What I felt then I better leave it to your imagination as I am not equal to penning those myriad feelings for your marveling. But, I can place their confessions before you for your appreciation of their situation.

They happened to meet only this morning that is after twenty-five years, and for want of a better place to exchange notes, he brought her home. Separated by fate from Murali, she reconciled to her life with Gopal to whom she bore two children as well. And to be fair to her man, he never made her feel wanting for anything, and that insensibly dulled her pining for Murali. But when she first discovered her man's perfidy, she was at her wits end that he addressed with his assurance of abiding loyalty, and that brought their matrimony back on an even keel. That was some ten years back. But her recent discovery that he was a habitual philanderer made her feel that she had been living in a fool's paradise and that distressed as well as depressed her. When she accidentally met Murali, she just wanted to seek his friendly shoulder to cry over, but as one thing led to the other, they ended up in bed. When Usha, said that Murali made her regain her self-worth, I felt my own hurt less hurting. But then, what's this empathy for the woman who broke my heart twice? Is it because of my innate regard for the nobility of love?

Soon, as he went along with her, I tried to gaze at the crystal ball. So, leaving me to nurse my wounds, he left to address her needs? What does that portend for me? Won't his 'felt' love for her make him lean towards her forever? That's about the pull of love in lovemaking, isn't it? Why by all means, Gopal is better in bed and yet didn't I see her ecstatic sex with Murali, and that would ensure they carry on regardless. Where that would leave me but in a corner of his life till the very end, and what sort of life that could be? While the three spruce up their lives with their paramours, why should I alone stick to the sticky course fidelity? What about making hay when the sun is still shining? Why I'm barely forty and hugely attractive, am I not; don't I know that as men of all ages can't desist from ogling at me. Why not I take a handsome youth for a lover to set my bed on fire to light my life? Nothing original about it though as I gathered that from the novels I've read for it's a part of the Parisian mores of yore. As the thought itself is so exciting, how thrilling seducing a youth, and all that follows, could be. What prevents me from experiencing it myself for there is no substitute for self-experience? Why not I freshen up and set out to conquer the youthful horizon in seductive style?

As I was about to leave, Binny, as if it smelled the rat, pulled my pallu to stop me from venturing out on my adventure! The faithful dog, my foot; it's only faithful to the master, never mind he's unfaithful to the mistress, who tends it. That revelation made

me feel alone than ever before and shrugging off Binny, I set out to find a paramour for an eleventh hour amour.

Anita Nair's prompt [*]

Story 12

Twelfth Tale

While the media was stuck up with Shibu's suicide, Rasika stayed away from the idiot box that Xmas day. But as it went overboard the next day with Shilpa, the dalit boy's mother, on board, she could see through the media game. That's to antagonize dalits against the emergent rightist party that rode to power in the national election and to buttress the leftist coalition that lost its sheen. What with the election to the state assemblies round the corner, the dalit suicide seemed to be a godsend to bust the rightist dispensation. Being a dalit with political ambitions, Rasika knew that her caste mattered in the politics of the day, and so watched the non-stop Shilpa show for the next six days looking for the winning ways at the hustings.

Came Twelfth Night and Rasika was tensed up as to how her son Rohan's suicide would be handled by the police and played up by the media. Having carpet covered Shibu's suicide, what if the media were to conclude that there was no novelty left in her son's case for it to milk. But then, won't the moneybags that back the party out of power induce the media to stay focused on the common agenda to hurt the upstart rightists? Why not showcase the anti-dalit character of the central government with two dalit suicides in a row? Rasika was bogged down thus, as if her own life depended on the media coverage of her son's death, and the arrival of the police, at dawn, to conduct an inquest provided a welcome distraction. But with the arrival of the media-wale, her apprehensions about their interest in the incident returned to the fore, and as they left she glued on to the TV to await the verdict. The idiot box began to beam the 'breaking news' with more manufactured outrage than before and she breathed a sigh of relief. As the victims happened to be poor and 'promising' students, the central government had a lot to answer for the caste discrimination on the country's campuses, so went the ranting of the anchors.

Surfing the channels unceasingly, she began to contemplate.

Today it's all about Rohan's body and his suicide note but by the morrow, won't the media-wale come back to milk the story? And her son's youthful photogenic face should only add to the story of his hapless suicide. Also, he was a research scholar in a premier institution, a leftist bastion at that. That she was a middle-aged beauty and educated as well should help the media in making it a wholesome affair. That's the heady mix that afforded Shilpa an unprecedented media-exposure in the wake of her son's suicide. And why should it be any different in her case? But unlike Shilpa, who played the dalit card to no avail, won't she cut her political suit according to the electoral cloth, and that should make a difference in the voting booths. If not, of what avail is sacrificing Rohan at the altar of opportunity.

"Being an underling to the leader is not the way to build a political career," she thought. "Won't my life illustrate that?"

She was poor being a dalit and spirited in spite of it. She was attractive by birth and sophisticated by education, both of which enabled her to marry Shekhar, a wheeler-dealer. With a prosperous husband and two cute children, a boy and a girl, when she thought she had nothing more to ask for, fate gave a political twist to her life. As it

happened, alive to the caste arithmetic in the electoral calculus, her man reckoned that it's only time before the middle-aged Saran of the leftist party would be catapulted to the pole position. So, he began investing in Saran. What with Saran well on course, as Shekhar began to up his stakes, she got sucked into the vortex. When Saran proposed to take her under his political wings, Shekhar had seen in that a second string to his business bow. But life seems to have had other ideas.

As her political proximity with Saran occasioned their personal intimacy, she was thrown into a dilemma at the lakshman rekha. Bugged down at the threshold, she chanced to hear a successful woman politician's public confession that it's a fair game for women to use their personal assets for a sexual climb on the political ladder. While men have all the means to reign in the political arena, so went the wannabe woman's argument, only by conceding her sexual space to the powers that be that women can gain political ground. With that 'sane' advice putting her in the family way for the third time, though on a non-family path, she gave birth to Rohan and that changed the equation of her life and the equilibrium of her mind. What with Saran becoming fond of his only son - he had two daughters from his wife - their liaison began to acquire the colours of a union making her dread about the prospect of her man getting wind of it sooner than later. But that fateful day ended her torment.

Shekhar was driving here and her kids in their Sokda to make it to a relative's wedding when Saran called him as they were midway and wanted her to take an urgent political call at Jhula, which, he hoped they hadn't as yet passed through. So, she broke her journey along with infant Rohan and made it to Saran but Shekhar and her other children couldn't reach their destination, owing to a head-on collision. Saran felt though sad it was a welcome development. It was sooner than later that Shekhar would've got wind of their peccadilloes and then wouldn't he have vented his pique in public. So, his sudden demise precluded their political ruin, and her paramour's reasoning made her suspect his hand behind her man's death, which the discreet closure of the matter by police as a hit and run case had only confirmed. Yet, she didn't bear a grudge as he made her his mistress and treated Rohan as his son and more so entrusted all his unaccounted wealth with her. But promising to lead her into the legislative council without facing the heat and dust at the hustings, he put paid to her budding grassroots political career. So she bided for her time as he rose in the party hierarchy.

After Rohan turned fifteen, Saran became increasingly scarce at her place, which loss of ardour she attributed to his advancing age, but when she came to know that he dumped her for a young thing, though hurt, yet she took it in her stride. But when he dragged his feet over fielding her as the party candidate in the ensuing elections, she felt he used her only to betray in the end. As her resentment of Saran grew, she began to perceive Rohan as a fruit of his vice and that made her contemptuous of her own son. Seeing her life was doubly jeopardized, as she was possessed with the idea of revenge, there came the breaking news of Shibu's suicide followed by sustained media focus on the boy's mother. When Rohan proclaimed that a dalit died in vain for he blamed none for his plight in his suicide note, she could visualize an anvil of her avenge and casually suggested that he might as well draft a meaningful one for fun. As he obliged her with a stinking indictment of his father's desertion of his mother though without naming the character, she knew that would come in handy to bring about Saran's doom.

That Twelfth Night, ensuring Rohan drank a glass of poisoned milk; she planted the suicide note under his pillow that the police had discovered on the morrow.

Having done with the past, Rasika began crystal-gazing.

In Rohan's death she could see the means of Saran's end. But not the whole means. Though he was bound to feel Rohan's loss, yet he wouldn't dare to face the media glare and so can't even see his boy's body. That in itself is bound to affect him in the short run but then death only warrants a limited grief period. It's the political death that would devastate him. And God willing, she would ensure that happens.

She would usurp all of his unaccounted wealth he had vested in her as reparation for his sexual abuse of her. But then, she needs someone powerful to protect her in her endeavour. Why, she knew that Kanwal, the state mukhiya of the rightist outfit, had a glad eye for her for long. What with the opinion polls predicting change of guard in the state, it could be the right time to hitch on to him. After all, she was desirable and hungry and he was promising and young and that way, Saran's ditching her could prove to be a blessing in disguise, a 'right' jilt so to say. And she would ensure to make her surrender appear to Kanwal as his conquest not only of her but also of Saran.

That's the bed side of the story, a prelude to the impending political drama, she thought turning in the bed.

She could see Shilpa wasting her godsend by merely playing the dalit card but she won't fail to make good the media attention to gain public approval, not merely the sympathy of the dalits. But given her late entry into his party, it would be well nigh impossible even for Kanwal to earn a reserved seat for her, at least not at this juncture. But it won't be so, if she opts to take on Saran in his bastion. The party is bound to welcome that move and may even strain its every nerve for an upset victory. Besides, Rohan's suicide note that squarely blamed his unknown dad for his end would come in handy for an insidious campaign against Saran. Moreover, even as Saran would be hard up to fund his electioneering, she could bribe the vulnerable voters with his money! What an irony and it won't get better for any black comedy.

Should she win, and if the pollsters are proved right, won't Kanwal make her the 'giant killer' minister? Won't he know that would afford him enough excuses to keep her near him without raising eyebrows?

As she was about to pick up her iPhone to contact Kanwal, he called her to tell her that he was nearing her place to condole her.

"What if he's imagining the same possibilities?" she thought with a sense of anticipation. "If not, can't I take his courtesy call to a mutually beneficial ground? Is life as simple as that and would crime pay such dividends? Is it not said that criminals invariably leave behind the tracks of their crime for the police to follow them? How am I to know whether I had left any, in spite of it all? I've to wait till the police come knocking at the door to know that, isn't it?"

Thereafter, at the sound of the buzzer, Rasika walked upto the door, wondering whether it was Kanwal or a police on the other side.

"If its Kanwal, he would lead me onto the gaddi and if it were a police then it's to the gallows. Let me see what life has in store for me."

